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Perugino's Saint Sebastian

Must mention his teaching of Raphael and his influence on that young man's "classic" types

In the early 1490's Pietro Perugino completed a number of altar paintings which display the highest achievement of his style, a style which culminates in the Crucifixion fresco in Santa Maria Maddalena dei Passi, one of the great monuments of quattrocento painting. Unfortunately, his talent was not sufficient for the demands of that age of unparalleled genius, and toward the end of his long career¹ his work became repetitive and his patronage dwindled to minor provincial churches. Vasari says Perugino was publicly termed an artistic dolt² by Michelangelo;³ but even more revealing of the pathos of the artist out-distanced by his peers is Vasari's statement, "I find it related that when the artists blamed Pietro for using the same figures over and over again, Pietro replied, 'I have painted in this work the figures you formerly admired-- what more can I do?'"

But at the height of his fame, when he was the most sought after painter in Italy, Perugino achieved a type of beauty which for centuries wedded the ideal of Italian painting to the ideal of beauty in the popular mind.

A drawing of a male nude⁴ acquired for the Museum in 1958 represents Perugino's greatest period. It is a study for the Saint Sebastian in the painting of 1493, Mary enthroned Between St. John the Baptist and St. Sebastian, made for San Domenico di Fiesole and now in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence.

Two paintings of the single figure of Saint Sebastian, one in the Louvre and one in the Borghese Gallery in Rome, though differing considerably from each other in color and detail, again employ the same figure of the saint. The two latter paintings are not dated but were undoubtedly of about the same period as the Uffizi painting. The drawing, then, probably dates from shortly before 1493. It is on paper with a prepared pink ground and, although the

drawing of the figure is intact, the surface has suffered some wear so that it is difficult to tell areas intentionally highlighted with white ink wash from lighter areas which are an accidental consequence of surface abrasion.

The drawing seems to be done mainly with a fine brush and brown ink over silver-point. In style and technique it is similar to one of Four Standing Apostles in the Fogg Museum,⁵ and equally deserves the description of Perugino's draughtsmanship in the latter drawing: "His line is pliant and sensitive,

his touch light, sure and easy, his contours firm but delicate, his shading quick decisive strokes...The eyes and mouths of even the slightest sketches have the same sense of introspection and contemplation as in the paintings."⁶

It is in fact remarkable how much of the atmosphere of Perugino's painting is inherent in the drawing. Perhaps it would be too much to claim for the drawing model all the qualities ascribed by Venturi to the Saint of the Louvre painting, "the innocence, the candor of a child, the inspiration of an angel, the resignation of a martyr, the beauty of a Christian Apollo."⁷ Nevertheless

the last comparison rings true for the drawn figure is the embodiment of the grace, serenity, and beauty of the classical ideal, and it is not difficult to place the saint in the spacious, tranquil atmosphere which saturates Perugino's greatest paintings.

¹ His birth date is variously given as 1445, according to Vasari, or 1450, according to the testimony of Raphael's father that Perugino was the same age as Leonardo (see F. Canuti, Il Perugino Siena, 1931, I, p. 4-6). Perugino died in 1523.

² ~~XXXXXXXX~~ Giorgio Vasari, Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects, ed. E. Burroughs, abridged (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1946), p. 167.

³ Ibid.

⁴ 58.411. 256 x 140 mm. Purchase, Stanley P. Allen Fund. Ex colls.: Count Moriz von Fries, Vienna; Prince of Liechtenstein. Published: R. van Marle, The Development of the Italian Schools of Painting (The Hague, 1933), XIV, p. 396, 538.

⁵ A. Mongan and P. Sachs, Drawings in the Fogg Museum of Art (Cambridge, Mass., 1940), I, p. 20-22, no. 28; II, fig. 26.

⁶ Ibid., I, p. 21.

⁷ Quoted by Canuti, op. cit., I, p. 78 (translated from Italian).

Fra Bartolommeo's Farm on the Slope of a Hill

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Fra Bartolommeo may be numbered among those artists, natural and prolific draftsmen, whose drawings are universally coveted. He produced quantities of figure drawings, composition drawings, and, finally, landscape studies. The latter are among the earliest examples of pure landscape in European art and show every evidence of having been sketched from nature. Compared to Fra Bartolommeo's figure studies, only a limited number of the landscapes were known until the 1957 auction of forty-one leaves from a recently discovered album of landscape drawings.¹ At that time the Museum was fortunate enough to acquire the beautiful Farm on the Slope of a Hill,² a capital example of Fra Bartolommeo's exquisite style which combines minute and delicate penmanship with unified breadth of design.

The artist, ^{BACCIO DELLA PORTA} a Florentine who began his career as Baccio della Porta,³ was deeply impressed by the Dominican preacher, Savonarola, who persuaded him to burn all his paintings of any but religious subjects. As the artist was only twenty-six when Savonarola was burned in 1498, we may imagine that the martyrdom of his idol had a great deal to do with Baccio's decision in 1500 to become a Dominican novice in Prato. In 1501 he returned to San Marco in Florence as Fra Bartolommeo. As has been recently suggested,⁴ it may have been on a journey to Venice in 1508 that Fra Bartolommeo saw and recorded the farm preserved in our drawing for, as was discovered by Mary Todd Glaser,⁵ a farm in the landscape background of a painting by Fra Bartolommeo, dated 1509, bears a very close resemblance to the drawing. The painting, God the Father with Saints Mary Magdalene and Catherine, is now in the painting gallery of Lucca.

see in the Italy

The landscape background shows a river with a graceful arched bridge, and to the right a farm place on a hill just as in the drawing. The buildings in the painting are seen from a slightly different angle, shifted to the right and higher, and the tallest building differs in some details. The front wing is remarkably close to the drawing, however, even to the long ledge just under the window above the arch at ground level. The double lean-to additions on the right side of the front wing are identical in the drawing and painting. It is curious that one of the most charming details of the drawing, the arbor shading the yard, is lacking in the painting, though the small size of the painted landscape precludes many drawing details, such as the line of laundry behind the arbor and the open gate of the wattle fence. 6

The early history of the album from which the drawing came is fairly complete. It first belonged to Fra Paolino da Pistoia who was the artist's heir. It then passed to a man of the convent of St. Catherine in the Piazza San Marco, ^{San} ~~San~~ ^{Paolina} ~~Paolina~~ ^{Plantilla} ~~Plantilla~~ ^{Helli} ~~Helli~~, and on her death passed into the possession of the convent. It is said the nuns had begun to use some of the large store of drawings for wrapping paper when in the eighteenth century the drawings were purchased by the Cavaliere Francesco Maria Nicolo Gabburri, a Fra Bartolommeo enthusiast, who mounted them in albums. At the sale of Gabburri's estate the landscape drawing album, among others, is said to have been acquired by an Englishman named Kent,² whereupon it vanished from public view until the auction sale five years ago.

Louise S. Richards

¹ Sotheby & Co., London, November 20, 1957.

² Gift of Hanna Fund; Purchase, Della E. and L. E. Holden Funds and 57.496. Pen and brown ink. 22 x 29 mm. Ex colls.: Fra Dudley P. Allen.

Paolino da Pistoia, Florence; Suor Plautilla Nelli, Florence; Santa Caterina in Piazza San Marco, Florence; F. M. N. Gabburri, Florence; Mr. Kent. Published: Columbia University Department of Art and Archaeology, Great Master Drawings of Seven Centuries (New York, 1959) [Catalog of exhibition held at M. Knoedler & Co.], p. 16-18, repr. pl. IX.

³ See F. Knapp, Allgemeines Lexikon der Bildenden Künstler, ed. U. Thieme and F. Becker (Leipzig, 1908), II, p. 561-566.

⁴ E. V. Kennedy, "A Landscape Drawing by Fra Bartolomeo," The Smith College Museum of Art Bulletin, no. 39 (1959), p. 8.

⁵ Columbia Univ., op. cit., p. 17.

⁶ Other drawings for the Lucea painting, figures and figural details, are listed by F. Knapp, Fra Bartolomeo della Porta (Belle, 1903), p. 139. See also cartoons and three other drawings in the Uffizi, the Uffizi in London; the drawings in London and in the Uffizi.

⁷ See G. G. [?], History of Painting in Italy, ed. by Fra Bartolomeo (London, 1937) [sale catalog, Sotheby & Co.]; also W. R. J., "Fine Works on the Market, a Volume of Landscape Drawings...", Apollo, LXVI (November 1957), 132-135.

⁸ See J. Fleming, "Mr. Kent, Art Dealer, and the Fra Bartolomeo Drawings," Connoisseur, CXLII (May 1958), 227; and also M. Jaffe, "Drawings from Dutch Collections," The Burlington Magazine, CIV (June 1962), 232.